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ABSTRACT

A rationale is offered for including life skills in curricula for students with special needs. Life skills are defined as encompassing daily living, personal/social, and occupational skills. Daily living skills include: managing personal finances, selecting and managing a household, caring for personal needs, safety awareness, preparing and consuming food, buying and caring for clothing, exhibiting responsible citizenship, using recreational facilities and engaging in leisure activities, and getting around the community. Personal/social skills encompass: achieving self-awareness, acquiring self-confidence, achieving socially responsible behavior, maintaining good interpersonal skills, achieving independence, achieving problem-solving skills, and communicating with others. Occupational skills focus on: knowing and exploring occupational options; selecting and planning occupational choices; exhibiting appropriate work habits and behavior; seeking, securing, and maintaining employment; exhibiting sufficient physical and manual skills; and obtaining specific occupational skills. Schools can require that each student with learning problems achieve these life skills prior to graduation. Three references and five suggested readings are listed. (JDD)

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ERIC Digest

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LIFE SKILLS MASTERY FOR STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

What Is the Importance of Life Skills?

Life skills are essential to job functioning, and they must be included in instruction for students with special needs. Several million individuals with learning problems are still denied the opportunity to engage in meaningful employment in the United States. Large numbers of students with disabilities, both high school graduates and dropouts, earn very low salaries (Edgar, 1988). These students do possess the potential to live and work in the community if they receive appropriate life skills instruction (Rusch & Phelps, 1987). However, without this instruction they often fail to hold their jobs. A life skills curriculum approach blends academic, daily living, personal/social, and occupational skills into integrated lessons designed to help students learn to function independently in society.

What Are Life Skills?

Life skills include a wide range of knowledge and skill interactions believed to be essential for adult independent living (Brolin, 1989). At present, many students with handicaps have special needs that are not being met. These students require education and support to learn these necessary behaviors. They must be able to dress and groom properly, use appropriate table manners, make decisions about money, and use transportation to get to work. The three major skill areas that need to be addressed are daily living, personal/social, and occupational skills.

What Are Daily Living Skills?

Many students with disabilities will marry and raise families. The majority will probably earn modest salaries; therefore, it is crucial that they learn how to manage a home, family, and finances as effectively as possible. Some states require that these skills be taught to students with special needs. Instructional responsibility lies with special educators, regular educators, parents, and peers. The following skills are some that have been identified as essential for independent adult living (Brolin, 1989):

Managing Personal Finances
Count money and make correct change.
Manage a savings and checking account.
Maintain a personal budget and keep records.
Demonstrate personal finance decision-making skills.
Make responsible expenditures.
Calculate and pay taxes.
Use credit responsibly.
Pay bills.
Deal with renting or leasing.

Selecting and Managing a Household
Perform or arrange for home maintenance.
Perform housekeeping tasks.
Plan and prepare meals.
Fill out warranty cards for new appliances and mail them.

Caring for Personal Needs
Exhibit proper grooming and hygiene.
Dress appropriately.
Obtain health care.
Avoid substance abuse.
Demonstrate knowledge of common illnesses, prevention and treatment.
Maintain physical fitness, nutrition and weight.

Safety Awareness
Identify safety signs.
Identify unfamiliar odors.
Identify unfamiliar sounds.
Demonstrate knowledge and ability to evacuate a building in an emergency.
Read and understand basic safety procedures.
Obey safety rules when walking during the day or at night.

Raising, Preparing, and Consuming Food
Purchase food and plan meals.
Clean food preparation areas.
Store food properly.
Prepare meals, read labels, and follow recipes.
Demonstrate appropriate eating habits.
Plan and eat balanced meals.

Buying and Caring for Clothing
Wash clothing.
Purchase clothing: Demonstrate knowledge of prices and sales.
Iron, mend, and store clothing.
Demonstrate use of dry cleaners and laundromat.

Exhibiting Responsible Citizenship
Demonstrate knowledge of civil rights and responsibilities.
Get legal aid.
Report a crime.
Register with Selective Service at age 18.
Demonstrate knowledge of local, state, and federal governments.
Demonstrate knowledge of the law and ability to follow the law.
Demonstrate knowledge of citizen rights and responsibilities.
Vote.

Using Recreational Facilities and Engaging in Leisure Activities
Demonstrate knowledge of available community resources.
Choose and plan activities.
Demonstrate knowledge of the value of recreation.
Engage in group and individual activities.
Plan vacation time.
Plan a social event.
Engage in hobbies, sports, music, arts and crafts.

Getting Around the Community
Differentiate between right side and left side, front and back, to demonstrate location.
Demonstrate knowledge of traffic rules and safety.
Demonstrate knowledge and use of many means of transportation including carpools.
Understand and use a map.
Drive a car; obtain a learner's permit, then a driver's license.
Obtain car insurance.

What Are Personal/Social Skills?

Personal and social skills are critical in keeping a job and maintaining friendships. Learning to get along with others is a challenge for everyone. Lack of appropriate personal and social skills is one of the most frequently cited causes of termination of employment. Students with learning problems often do not learn by observing. Skill instruction in this area should include the following:

Achieving Self-Awareness
Identify physical and psychological needs.
Identify interests and abilities.
Identify emotions.
Demonstrate knowledge of physical self.
Demonstrate proper care, use, and maintenance of prosthetic devices or sensory aids required.
Use appropriate methods to cope with stress.

Acquiring Self-Confidence
Express feelings of self-worth.

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Describe others' perception of self.
Accept and give praise.
Accept and give criticism.
Develop confidence in self.
Identify and distinguish the proper way to answer and use the telephone.
Wear appropriate apparel, using clothes or uniforms to fit social and work situations.

Achieving Socially Responsible Behavior
Develop respect for the rights and properties of others.
Recognize authority and follow instructions.
Demonstrate appropriate behavior and social etiquette in public places and when dating or eating out.
Demonstrate knowledge of important character traits.
Recognize personal roles.

Maintaining Good Interpersonal Skills
Demonstrate listening and responding skills.
Establish and keep close relationships.
Make and keep friendships.

Achieving Independence
Do things without help.
Accept responsibility for actions.
Get around the community and be able to travel.
Cope with changes in travel schedule.
Cope with being lost.
Follow travel safety procedures.
Choose friends.
Get to school on time.
Decide what to wear.

Achieving Problem-Solving Skills
Seek assistance when needed.
Recognize problems.
Anticipate consequences.
Develop and evaluate alternatives.
Develop goals, solutions, and plans.

Communicating with Others
Recognize and respond to emergency situations.
Communicate with understanding.
Demonstrate knowledge of social cues and the subtleties of conversation, both verbal and nonverbal.
Listen to others.

What Are Occupational Skills?

Between 70% and 80% of students with disabilities are unemployed and underemployed following graduation. Educators and parents still have much to do in this area. Early educational efforts need to be directed toward the following skill areas:

Knowing and Exploring Occupational Options
Explore occupational possibilities.
Identify the rewards of work.
Locate sources of occupational and instructional information.
Identify personal values met through work.
Identify societal values met through work.
Classify jobs into categories.
Investigate local occupational and instructional opportunities in the community; make site visitations.

Selecting and Planning Occupational Choices
Make realistic occupational choices.
Identify requirements of appropriate and available jobs.
Identify occupational aptitudes.
Identify main occupational interests.
Identify major occupational needs.

Exhibiting Appropriate Work Habits and Behavior
Follow directions and observe regulations.
Recognize the importance of attendance and punctuality.
Recognize the importance of supervision.
Demonstrate knowledge of safety.
Work with others.
Meet demands for high-quality work.
Work at a satisfactory rate.

Seeking, Securing, and Maintaining Employment
Search for a job.
Apply for a job.
Interview for a job.
Maintain postschool occupational adjustment.
Demonstrate knowledge of competitive standards.
Know how to adjust to changes in employment.

Exhibiting Sufficient Physical and Manual Skills
Demonstrate stamina and endurance.
Demonstrate satisfactory balance and coordination.
Demonstrate manual dexterity.
Demonstrate sensory discrimination.

Obtaining Specific Occupational Skills
Attend prevocational learning stations or centers.
Take advantage of in-school work experiences.
Take advantage of volunteer experiences.
Serve in community rotations.
Take advantage of work/study services.
Take advantage of the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA).
Attend vocational classrooms.
Obtain special vocational education.
Obtain on-the-job training.

What Can the Schools Do?

Schools can require an entry and exit plan for every student with learning problems wherein the life skills listed here are completed prior to graduation. At present, too many educators continue to use the same old approaches with a nonfunctional curriculum. Educators must become advocates for each child with special needs and stress "hands-on" life skill mastery.

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Note: Much of the information in this fact sheet was based on the Secondary Special Education Program Manual (1989), prepared by Special Education Services, Michigan Department of Education, and *Life Centered Career Education: A Competency Based Approach* (1989) by Donn E. Brolin, The Council for Exceptional Children.

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